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ABSTRACT

School counselors refer to themselves as professionals who provide services to clients. Nonetheless, a critical examination of perceptions and roles is necessary before this assertion can be accepted. The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to examine the extent to which school counseling in Queensland, Australia is considered a profession, and (2) to examine the role and function of school counselors. Two surveys provided the data for analysis. The Counseling as a Profession Survey was completed by 268 school counselors and educators. Findings demonstrate that consensus exists on the professional status of school counselors. Respondents strongly supported the notion that school counselors have extensive training and qualifications; possess specialized knowledge and skills; perform work that is complex and sensitive; deal with sensitive legal and ethical issues; have prior association with teaching or psychology disciplines; and serve a function that is unique in the education system. These themes support the professional status of school counseling in society, as they relate to criteria indicative of a profession. The results of counselor responses to the Professional Identity Survey clearly reflect the broad, complex, multifacted role of school counselors which also indicates their particular professional identity. (LSR)

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The professional status and identity of school counselling in Queensland: Or, are we a profession yet?

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Although school counselling in the Australian education system struggles to be seen as separate from the psychology profession, services provided by school counsellors have been well established and accepted in contemporary times. Researchers, counsellor educators, and professional associations have discussed the issues surrounding professionalism and to what extent school counselling in general can be considered a profession. School counsellors refer to themselves as being professionals and providing professional services to clients, but a critical examination of perceptions and roles is necessary before this assertion can be accepted as valid and reasonable.

Despite recent restructuring of counselling services by many employing authorities around Australia, school counsellors continue to be in demand at every level of the education system. There is a long history of counselling and psychological services in schools, with earliest services dating back to the 1920s, where the emphasis was on vocational guidance. This history of counselling is similar to the experience in North America, with the reality being that both the United States and the United Kingdom have influenced many educational polices and practices in Australia.

For occupational groups to move toward professionalisation, it is useful to examine the public pereeption of the group. It was through an examination of this public perception, as represented by educators who the major consumers of school counselling services, that the occupational group could identify its relative strengths and areas for development. The purpose of this research study was twofold. The initial focus for this study was to examine the extent to which school counselling in Queensland was considered a profession, as defined by a set of commonly accepted criteria.

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The second component of this study was to examine the role and function of school counsellors. The role and function contributes directly to the examination of the professional identity of this occupational group. The professional identity was examined by reviewing the activities where a consensus exists among school counsellors. This was done via the collection of information from a comprehensive survey about the professional activities that school counsellors perform.

Results

This section reports the analysis of the surveys and explores status and identity by examining the following research questions, relative to the population of school counsellors in Queensland:

1. What is the difference between the perceptions of school counsellors and registered educators from K-12, relative to the criteria considered indicative of a profession?
2. What is the professional identity of school counsellors, as indicated by activities, roles, and functions?

Research question 1 was dealt with by the Counselling as a Profession Survey, and research question 2 was dealt with by the results from the Professional Identity Survey for School Counsellors.

Table 1

Demographics of Respondents with Comparisons to Total Populations

Data Collected	**School Counselors** N = 149	Ed Dept Statistics[a] N = 469	Educators n = 90	"Extra" Educators n = 29	p Values[b]	**Total Educators** N = 119	B.T.R. Statistics[c] N= 37,396
Gender							
Male	**44 (64)**	40	29 (26)	24 (7)	.60	**28 (33)**	29
Female	**56 (82)**	60	71 (63)	76 (22)		**72 (85)**	71
Location							
City/Suburbs	**66(96)**	78	67(58)	97(28)	.001	**74(86)**	-
Rural	**34(49)**	22	33(29)	3(1)		**26(30)**	-
Sector							
Primary	**34(49)**	45	44(39)	97(28)		**57(67)**	54
Secondary	**40(57)**	43	37(32)	0	<.001	**28(32)**	42
Other	**26(38)**	12	19(17)	3(1)		**14(18)**	4
Employer							
State	**80(117)**	NA	72(64)	7(2)	<.001	**56(66)**	72
Private	**20(29)**		28(25)	93(27)		**44(52)**	28

Study							
<3 yrs	**0**	-	0	0		**0**	8
3 yrs	**1(1)**	-	22(19)	17(5)	NA	**20(24)**	29
3+ yrs	**99(145)**	-	78(69)	83(24)		**80(93)**	63
"Is School Counselling a Profession?"							
Yes	**97(141)**	NA	100(90)	100(29)	NA	**100(119)**	NA
No	**3(4)**		0	0		**0**	

Note: Data indicates percentages and frequencies, % (n).

Age	**45(7)**	-	39(9)	38(10)	.51	**39(9)**	38
Years Since Last Degree	**8(7)**	-	12(8)	7(6)	.002	**10(7)**	-
Years of Study	**7**	-	4	4	NA	**4**	4
Yrs of Work Experience	**12(6)**	-	14(9)	16(10)	.16	**14(9)**	13

Note. Data indicates means and standard deviations, M (SD).

Dashes (_) = data was unavailable. NA = not applicable.

[a]Queensland Department of Education data on Guidance Officers.

[b]For Categorical data, p = chi square analysis; For Interval data, p = ANOVA.

[c]Queensland Board of Teacher Registration data on registered Teachers.

Findings

Counselling as a Profession Survey

All respondents were asked the question "Do you believe that school counselling is a profession?" and responded by checking a Yes or No. They were also provided with space to write why they responded in a particular way. Every educator responded in the affirmative to the question, while 97% of school counsellors respond the same way. The 3% (n = 4) of school counsellors who indicated they did not believe school counselling was a profession, stated that this was because their employer did not treat them with respect (n = 1), they did not set their own rates of pay (n = 1), and due to the absence of a state registration process (n = 2). Many of the respondents indicated the reason they perceived school counselling was a profession related to one of six major themes. Table 2 outlines the types of comments made by respondents.

Table 2

Types of Comments made by Respondents in Percentages

Category of Comment	School Counsellor	Educators
Extensive Specialised Training & Qualifications	**29**	**27**
Specialised Knowledge and Skills	**19**	**24**
Dealing with Legal and Ethical Issues	**18**	4
Unique and Vital Service in the School	11	8
Prior Association with Teaching or Psychology	10	11
Complex and Sensitive Nature of the Role	6	**20**
Need for Peer Supervision to Enter the Field	4	2
Professional Associations offering Support	2	0
Dedication to the Vocation of Helping	2	2

School counsellors' and educators' (N = 268) responses to the 47 items contained on the Counselling as a Profession Survey underwent a series of factor analyses using maximum likelihood extraction and oblique rotation. This methodology is a sound method to validate the factor structure of existing scales. An iterative process resulted in 23 items measuring 6 of the 8 hypothesised factors being retained.

For each subscale of the Counselling as a Profession Survey, the scores on the items were totaled and averaged to generate a single mean score for each scale using the same metric. The means and standard deviations of the six subscales are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of the Counselling as a Profession Survey by Subscale

Subscale	Sample	n or items	M[a]	SD
Social Service	Counsellors[b]		5.97	1.00
	Educators[c]		5.81	1.07
	Total Group	4	**5.90**	1.04
Training	Counsellors		6.31	0.79
	Educators		5.62	1.15
	Total Group	5	**5.99**	1.03
Autonomy	Counsellors		5.01	1.07
	Educators		4.10	1.38
	Total Group	3	**4.59**	1.30
Responsibility	Counsellors		6.24	0.79
	Educators		5.49	1.06
	Total Group	3	**5.90**	1.00

Associations	Counsellors			5.84	0.86
	Educators			5.48	0.96
		Total Group	**4**	**5.67**	0.92
Ethics	Counsellors			6.05	0.85
	Educators			6.18	0.78
		Total Group	**4**	**6.11**	0.82

Note. The total for each subscale was divided by the sum of the number of items to gain a consistent metric.

[a]Metric = 7-point Likert scale. [b]$\underline{n}$ = 137. [c]$\underline{n}$ = 116.

A multivariate analysis of variance was computed to compare the means for the six subscales of the Counselling as a Profession Survey for the school counsellors with the educators. This analysis revealed that there were significant differences between the two groups (Pillais = .26; $\underline{F}$ (6, 246) = 14.05; $\underline{p}$ <.001).

The univariate analysis indicates differences for Counsellor Training ($\underline{F}$ (1, 251) = 31.77, $\underline{p}$ < .001); Practitioner Autonomy ($\underline{F}$ (1, 251) = 35.13, $\underline{p}$ < .001); Practitioner Responsibility ($\underline{F}$ (1, 251) = 41.25, p < .001); and Professional Associations ($\underline{F}$ (1, 251) = 9.51, $\underline{p}$ < .001). No differences were noted for Social Service ($\underline{F}$ (1, 251) = 1.55, p = .214); and Code of Ethics ($\underline{F}$ (1, 251) = 1.44, p = .232). In all but one case (Code of Ethics), school counsellors were higher than educators on each scale.

Professional Identity Survey for School Counsellors

Research Question 2. What is the professional identity of school counsellors, as indicated by activities, roles, and functions?

School counsellors' responses to the 37 activity items on the Professional Identity Survey for School Counsellors were analysed using the iterative factor analysis method outlined previously. This process resulted in 26 items being retained. All of the seven hypothesised factors were retained using maximum likelihood extraction and oblique rotation method. The criterion of .4 for significance of factor loadings was adopted. The means and standard deviations of the seven factors are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of the Professional Identity Survey for School Counsellors by Subscale (in Descending Order)

Survey Subscale	n of items	M[a]	SD
Consultation and Education (n = 145)	5	5.88	0.82
Program Development & Evaluation (n = 145)	3	5.17	1.19
Career Counselling (n = 143)	4	4.81	1.79
Counselling Interventions (n = 142)	3	4.57	1.18
Assessment (n = 144)	4	4.51	1.72
Training and Supervision (n = 144)	3	3.52	1.86
Research (n = 144)	4	2.84	1.33

Note. The total for each subscale was divided by the sum of the number of items to gain a consistent metric.

[a]Metric = 7-point Likert scale.

A series of multivariate analyses of variance were computed to compare the means for the seven subscales to examine if significant differences were present for gender, location, sector, and employer. These analyses revealed that there were no significant differences for gender or location. However a multivariate difference was found for sector (Pillais = .70; F (7, 93) = 30.28; p <.001), and univariate differences were found for Career Counselling (F (1, 99) = 138.38; p <.001), and Assessment (F (1, 99) = 35.78, p < .001). Table 5 outlines these differences.

Table 5

Comparisons of the Professional Identity Survey for School Counsellors by Sector

Subscale	**Primary** (n = 46)		**Secondary** (n = 55)	
	M[a]	SD	M[a]	SD
Career Counselling	3.02	1.57	**5.91**	.85
Assessment	**5.26**	1.44	3.46	1.57

[a]Metric = 7-point Likert scale.

There was a significant multivariate finding for employer type (Pillais = .70; F (7, 93) = 30.28; p <.001). A univariate difference was found for the Counselling Interventions subscale based on employer (F (1, 120) = **5.38**, p = .022). The State employer mean was **4.62** (SD = 1.16) and Private employer mean being 3.81 (SD = 1.16).

Discussion

There exists consensus on the professional status of the occupational group of school counsellors. Respondents strongly support the notion that school counsellors have extensive training and qualifications, possess specialised knowledge and skills, the nature of their work was complex and sensitive, they deal with sensitive legal and ethical issues, prior association with teaching or psychology disciplines, or that the school counsellor's function was unique in the education system. **These themes support the idea that school counselling has professional status in society, as these themes relate to the criteria indicative of a profession.**

The results indicate that counsellors are involved with the following activities: Consultation and Education, Program Development and Evaluation, Career Counselling, Counselling Interventions, Assessment, Training and Supervision, and Research. All but the last-mentioned activity, were considered by school counsellors to rate over the half-way mark of the 7-point Likert scale for importance. **These responses clearly reflect the broad, complex, and multifaceted role of the school counsellor and indicates their particular professional identity.**

Conclusion

It has been noted that once the social need for a service has been identified, individuals already performing the function band together to gain formal legal recognition for their services. What invariably follows is a move to organise a professional association to support the needs of the individuals and the group.

School counsellors in Queensland have been performing a critical function for some time. They are typically Masters-level practitioners whose services are valued by the school and community. With regards official recognition by a public authority, it must be noted that the Board of Teacher Registration accepts the initials MAGCA and MQGCA to be listed on the Certificate of Registration, along with university qualifications. The policy of the Board states that only membership to professional bodies that involve completion of academic or professional requirements may be recorded on the Certificate. This indicates that the Board recognises these associations as credible and able to identify who meets stringent entry requirements. This recognition of our association may form part of efforts for the registration of school counsellors.

The professional status and identity of school counsellors continues to be solidified, particularly with the support by the QGCA via the code of ethics, support for research, publications, conferences, liaison with employers and universities, and a public identity which is respected. With moves toward standardising training requirements and promoting the role of school counsellors, professionalisation is a reality. Indeed the future for a profession full of professionals is a certainty.